

One bird I am always pleased to meet with here is the Maroon Oriole which one first encounters above 5,000. Slightly higher up one first encounters the Hoary Barwing, with its loose untidy appearance and the tiny Nepal Parrotbill an enigmatic little bird of the Ringal, or dwarf bamboo. At no season can one go into the oak and rhododendron forests around Kathmandu and fail to encounter the Black Capped Sibia. This bird, with its bright chestnut plumage is so omnipresent and vociferous as to be almost a bore. I took a party of British bird-watchers to Phulchowki once and they were all quite pleased to "tick" this species when we first met with it, but within half an hour people were raising their binoculars on a fleeting bird only to exclaim "just another damned sibia!" No account of these hilly forests would be complete without mentioning the Woodpeckers, the commonest of which seems to be the Rufousbellied Sapsucker, a bird which bores holes in the oak in which to collect sap, a habit which is parasitized by many other birds, including the Sibilas. One may also see the Darjeeling Pied Woodpecker, the Brownfronted Pied, and the Small Crimsonbreasted Pied Woodpeckers.

(To be continued)

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Birdwatching at Kolleru lake, by S. Ashok Kumar IAS.

Kolleru lake is a natural depression of land between the Krishna and West Godavari districts of Andhra Pradesh with a water spread of 348 square miles. It serves as a drainage reservoir receiving an inflow of 1,10,920 cusecs from several drains while its discharge through Upperturu (a tidal stream 39 miles long joining the Bay of Bengal) is 6650 cusecs. During the monsoon season when there are heavy rains, the lake swells, inundating surrounding lands and villages. The lake is a good source of fish, like Cat fish, Climbing perch, Murrail and also of good sized prawns. There is an abundance of tadpoles, toads, frogs, snails and a variety of aquatic insects and larvae in the lake. A large number of birds, including migratory birds visit the lake and make it their habitat and breeding ground in view of availability of food and the vast expanses of water plants, weeds, tall grass and floating vegetation which are congenial for breeding.

Equipped with a 20' x 50' Zenith field binoculars and the "Book of Indian Birds" by Salim Ali, I decided to visit the lake on the 22nd January. The sky was clear and the weather pleasant when we set out in a convoy at 7.20 a.m. The cool breeze forecast a promising day. Motoring on Kaikalur Road, we observed on either side, swarms of yellowthroated sparrows, circling in groups over paddy fields and settling on hay stacks. While nearing Manur Village, we noticed a lone Wood Sandpiper on a canal bund ridiculously moving its hind portion up and down. We next turned our attention to the Black Drongos perched on a telegraph wire ahead of our convoy. Two of them

swooped to the ground to nab at their juicy prey. We cruised slowly along the road and found Common Green Bee-eaters, Indian Robins, Redvented Bulbuls, and occasionally the Blue Jays on their favourite place of perching, the telegraph wire. A group of Common Mynas were busy picking insects in the paddy field. We covered some distance and saw a White-breasted King Fisher stationed on a roadside palmyrah tree. An Indian Robin, tossing its jaunty cocked tail hopped from the termite mound to the spider's web on a Prosopis plant. The morning hours were thus full of bird life.

We disembarked from our vehicles at the 10th mile near Chinnayedlagadi. The Village Magistrate of Siddapuram, is a keen enthusiast of birds and takes a lot of interest and pride in conducting visitors to Kolleru lake area and showing its avifauna. I wanted him particularly to accompany us during our trip. He arrived at the bridge a little later and all of us proceeded to the embarking point where two country boats were kept ready. These boats with a carrying capacity of ten passengers are extensively used in Kolleru lake to ferry villagers, goats, poultry, and transport agricultural produce and other daily needs. Kolleru lake is generally 8' to 10' deep throughout except where drains have been excavated in the lake bed. The boats glide on the placid waters of the lake by a thrust of bamboo poles. The boatman sticks the bamboo pole into the lakebed at an angle, and traverses from one edge of the boat to the other, thus giving a gentle push.

The young boatmen, feeling honoured by our visit, promised to take us to the heart of the lake and the feeding grounds. We settled in the boat with high hopes and expectations. Not far from the embarking point, were a flock of Cattle Egrets with white plumage stalking along the grassy edge of the drain. The floating vegetation chiefly consists of aquatic weeds like Ipomia, Lily and Water Hyacinth. There are extensive areas consisting of tall grass, huge reeds and rushes. Flocks of Pied Mynas and sparrows settled among the reeds, swiftly dispersed on our approach. The Taluk Public Relations Officer was quick to click the camera while they were in flight. After gliding noiselessly some distance among the reeds, we were excited to locate, for the first time, a pair of handsome Purple Moorhens pecking at reed stems. The conspicuous bald red forehead, blue tail and long red legs rendered their identification easy. The white patch in the hind portion visible every time the tail flicks up is another clue to its identification. Hastily they disappeared into the dense reeds at the sight of our approaching boat. About 200 yards from the point where the Purple Moorhen made their exit, I could perceive some movement in Ipomia weeds. With a sweep of my 20' x 50' binoculars, I could locate a Green Shank with its characteristic long beak slightly upcurved, and long olive green legs. Unlike the Purple Moorhen, the Green Shank is not a shy bird, and it obliged me with a good pose at close quarters. Farther away among the reeds, we could observe the Little Stint picking



tiny insects. Our party was nearing Motevari Lanka when the village Magistrate of Siddapuram pointed in the direction of fields where there were flocks of Little Stints. Our efforts to approach them stealthily to take a snap proved futile. We therefore set out for Gudivaka Lanka. After crossing the fresh water tank and entering the lake waters, I could make out a black outline of a bird at a distance. Focussing my binoculars I could distinctly see the Little Cormorant perched upright on a stake drying itself with outstretched wings. Its glistening black colour and size has earned it a local name "water crow". While passing by the row of stakes standing like soldiers, we noticed several teals in flight against the clear blue sky. Among the Ipomia growth, we came across a pair of Purple Moorhen jerking their heads and flicking their tails. It was 11-00 a.m. when we landed at Gudivaka Lanka. After settling a land dispute between two sections of the villagers, we set out for Prathikodu Lanka. Beyond the tall grass, we had a glimpse of a cormorant in flight. After negotiating the bend, we saw at a distance of 200 yards, three cormorants and a lone Cattle Egret perched on fish stakes. Out of the tall grass came the squeaky noises of Pied Mynas which abruptly took to flight on sighting us. We advanced to find a Redwattled Lapwing. Yonder on the grassy bund we could see rows of Cattle Egrets alongside grazing buffaloes, and two egrets were riding upon their backs with impunity. At a point one kilometer from Prathikodu Lanka, hundreds of teals were sighted whirling and settling among Ipomia vegetation. After skirting the nylon nets spread between bamboo poles two feet above the water surface, we headed for Prathikodu Lanka our lunch station.

At 4.00 p.m. we set out on our return journey. After paddling our way through the still waters of the lake some distance, we saw several flocks of coots, the commonest of the water birds. It is very difficult to make any successful approach to these birds as our boat was not camouflaged. Yet we tried to silently and stealthily advance, but alarmed, the birds, in their characteristic style skittered along the water to take off, half running and half flying. The ivory white pointed bill and frontal shield diagnostic of these birds distinguishes them from other birds. Among the "Kikkisa" grass, the ubiquitous sparrows kept up their chorus.

We were approximately one mile from Bujabalapatnam our disembarking point, when we saw a vast expanse of weeds and rushes. While our boat was slowly finding its way through this mass of vegetation, I surveyed the area with my binoculars. I could locate several pairs of Purple Moorhens, stalking and skulking through the reedy swamp and, alarmed by our approach, they scuttled into cover. The large numbers confirmed that the swampy area is their home ground. While our boat was heading towards the disembarking point, Night Herons and Cattle Egrets were present in large numbers as if to bid farewell to us.

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